

Joint Council of County Special Services School Districts

Testimony before the State Board of Education

**Submitted by: Barbara Makoski, Superintendent
Cape May County Special Services School District**

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Joint Council of County Special Services School Districts. The eight county-based public school districts serve approximately 4,500 students with multiple disabilities, autism, behavioral disorders and severe cognitive and physical impairments.

As receiving school districts, one of the first countywide shared services systems in New Jersey, established to meet the specialized needs of students with severe and "low-incidence" disabilities, the county special services school districts have previously testified on the proposed changes to the code. On behalf of the Council, thank you for listening to our concerns, particularly about class size ratios and the age span requirements at the secondary level.

Today I wish to focus on the proposal (at NJAC6A:14-4.7) to reduce the age span in special class programs from four years to three at the elementary level. As we have testified in the past, chronological age is not always a meaningful measure for students with severe cognitive disabilities who function at a very low level. Decreasing the current four-year age span to three will force schools to add numerous classes and staff, but it will have no positive impact on learning for these students.

By definition, special class programs serve students with similar needs. There is no justification for reducing the age range in classes where students of different ages have the same functional level. It would create a cost increase without providing an educational advantage for the students.

The students in question in Special Services School Districts are generally functioning at the same, or close to, the same level. Our cognitively severe students are many times functioning at around one (1) to three (3) years of age, if that. Some even function below the one-year-old level, and are working on very basic, functional life skills. It makes little difference if they are four years apart in chronological age.

Money is tight in education. This is not the time to place an additional requirement on districts, particularly small districts, by imposing new, but questionable regulations that will necessitate hiring more

professional staff and/or aides and providing additional classroom space with no discernable educational benefit.

As proposed, the regulations impose a hard and fast rule for the placement of elementary age children. In the absence of educational evidence to support the benefit of limiting age-related placements, the regulations should permit leeway in the placement of cognitively severely disabled students and continue to permit a span of up to four years when all evidence is weighed.

The four-year span has worked successfully in the past and a reduction in the span, based on chronological age, will have no appreciable benefit for the students.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the county special services school districts.

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